DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 208 804 IR 009 394

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TITLE The History of Libraries from the Colonial Period of a Country to Independence.
PUB DATE Aug 80
NOTE 11p.; Best copy available. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the International Federation of Library Associations (Manila, Philippines, August 18-23, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Influences; *Developing Nations; *Economic Factors; *Environmental Influences; History; *Libraries; Library Science; Library Services; *Social Influences

ABSTRACT

An overview of libraries in developing nations examines in general terms their historical development during their colonial and post-independence periods and discusses the more salient factors affecting development. These factors include language, distribution of population, topography, poor communication, level of formal education, illiteracy, agricultural and mining-based economies, poor image of the library profession, lack of the reading habit, lack of suitable reading materials, reliance on foreign books, foreign exchange restrictions, the custodial concept of librarianship, censorship, and oral tradition. (EAA)

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ED208804

IFLA General Conference 1980

Division: Education and Research

Round Table: Library History

91/THEOR/6E

91/LIBHI/1E

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THE HISTORY OF LIBRARIES FROM THE COLONIAL PERIOD OF A COUNTRY TO INDEPENDENCE

By

John YOCKLUNN

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(A Paper Presented to the 46th General Conference of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, Manila, 18 - 23 August 1980)

Introduction

Whole books and many articles have been or could be written about the history of libraries in individual developing countries. It is thus clearly impossible, in the limited time available to me, to undertake a detailed comparative study or a systematic treatment of the topic. Instead, I intend to examine briefly the development of libraries in the colonial period and in the post-independence period in general terms, and to identify some of the factors that affect the history of libraries in developing countries.

Libraries in the Colonial Period

Some developing countries have had libraries, in the sense of repositories of manuscripts and rare books, for several centuries. But libraries as we understand them today, are a fairly recent phenomenon in these countries, beginning in most of these countries only in the second half of the nineteenth century or in the twentieth century.

An early impetus for the provision of libraries came from expatriates who worked in the colonial countries, such as administrators, army and police officers, teachers, missionaries, traders and so on. Many were educated and were used to reading. In many locations, particularly the more remote areas where there were few expatriates, the range of social activities would be limited and this would tend to encourage reading, both as a means of recreation and of self-improvement. While some had books sent from abroad, the demand for provision of books locally to meet the needs of expatriates soon grew. As a result, we find the establishment of subscription libraires in some countries early in the period of colonial rule. When public libraries were established, the main users would be expatriates, and indeed public libraries in many countries tended to cater primarily for expatriates up to Independence or shortly before it.

The metropolitan powers established formal systems of primary and secondary education, modelled largely on their own patterns, in each colony. The purpose was usually to produce a local elite who could be used to rule the country and who would provide trained manpower to assist the expatriate civil servants and administrators.

In the early stages of colonial rule, some students were sent to the metropolitan country for part of their secondary education and for their tertiary education.

In time one or more universities were established, to produce the leaders and skilled manpower required for the development of the country.

In some countries, there was a desire for "modernisation" and for contact with "superior" Western ideas and Western civilization, which resulted in a demand for a Western-type education.

The result of these influences was an educated class, some of whom were interested in reading and who made use of the public libraries.

Christian churches and missionaries also played a part in fostering a library environment. On the one hand, they established schools, colleges and sometimes universities, to provide a "Christian" type of education and to train indegenous persons for the priesthood. This also produced an educated elite who were potential library users, as well as providing libraries in some of the training institutions.

On the other hand, they translated the scriptures into vernacular languages and produced religious tracts, literacy material, and so on into these languages, often developing a written form for the language where this did not already exist.

Governments have also produced publications in vernacular languages. These may be for the purpose of political mobilisation or promotion of national unity. They may be for the purpose of providing practical information, for example on health or farming. They may be for formal education or adult education.

Some governments also undertake mass campaigns to teach adults to read.

The result of these efforts by churches and by the Government of a country is an increase of literacy, and some increase in demand for reading materials and use of libraries.

The growth of universities, as well as the establishment of institutes of administration (for the training of civil servants), agricultural schools, teachers colleges and other tertiary institutions, resulted in the existence of a different type of library - academic libraries catering for the staff and students of the institution.

Librarians in the colonial period were mainly expatriates, and the initial developments in the library field were due to the influence and work of a few dedicated and enthusiastic libraries from abroad. However, as libraries developed, nationals were sent overseas for training in librarianship, to be followed by establishment of local schools of librarianship.

Apart from direct assistance to libraries in its own colonies, Britain has established British Council libraries which often function as public libraries in the absence of such libraries. A number of other countries, including the United States of America have also established libraries in the developing countries, but these tend to be aimed more directly towards the dissemination of information about the country concerned.

Britain and the United States, and to a lesser extent, other developed countries have provided foreign aid and technical assistance for libraries in developing countries and training of librarians for these countries.

Technological, scientific and industrial development in the colonial country also result in the establishment of libraries to provide information for the support of such development.

The typical library situation in a colonial country prior to Independence would be:

(a) a small number of public libraries, mainly in the urban centres;

(b) a number of documentation centres and special libraries (usually government funded - as most enterprises in the private sector are foreign - based and receive library services direct from the parent organization);

(c) some academic libraries in the university (or universities) and in other training institutions;

(d) a very small number of school libraries, due to reliance on a few set texts, the absence of library-based teaching and learning, and the emphasis on paper qualifications, rather than the attainment of a real education.

(e) expatriate librarians in the senior library positions, but an increasing number of indegenous librarians trained locally as well as overseas.

(f) a concept of librarianship modelled on the metropolitan colonial power or on that of the aid-giving foreign country.

Libraries After Independence

Independence invariably results in 'localization' or 'indegenization' (often called 'Africanization' in Africa), i.e. the replacement of expatriates by nationals of the country. This may arise from nationalist feelings, a need to provide more jobs for educated nationals, or from economics (since the employment of nationals is much cheaper than that of employing expatriates who require higher salaries, provision of housing, education allowances for their children, higher costs for leave fares and so on-----costs that were previously borne by the colonial government).

This has two main effects for libraries in developing countries:

(a) There are many opportunities for nationals to occupy the most senior positions in the civil service, in private enterprise, and in politics, as well as in the more prestigious professions, such as law and medicine, so that few of the most able and better educated graduates enter librarianship;

(b) Most expatriate librarians are replaced by indigenous librarians, often with little experience and sometimes with inadequate qualifications.

Most independent developing countries have national planning of the economy and development plans, where the country's limited resources are directed towards certain economic and development goals. Since expenditure on libraries does not directly result in an increase in the gross national product, libraries receive a low priority in the allocation of resources. While libraries associated with agriculture and other technical fields and libraries of institutions training skilled manpower usually receive reasonable funding, it is likely that only token amounts which are totally inadequate will be allocated to school and public libraries, where it is impossible to quantify the cost/benefits.

In this situation of a planned economy, there is a trend towards some sort of library planning. On the part of the planners who wish to ensure that the resources so reluctantly allocated to libraries are closely controlled, emphasis is placed on nationalization of library resources and avoidance of duplication. On the part of librarians, it becomes clear that because so little is available for libraries, library priorities must be established and some sort of blueprint or library development plan implemented in order to achieve any progress at all.

Often some sort of Libraries Board or Bureau of Libraries is established to exercise a planning and coordination function, or this function may be given to the National Library. Where there is no National Library in existence, such a body may be created as the focal point for a nation's libraries.

Sometimes new universities and other training institutions are created to meet the accelerated demand for graduates after Independence. This expansion in university and college education usually means new academic libraries improvements to existing academic collections.

Schools of librarianship are established or strengthened in this period to replace expatriate librarians and to meet growth in some library areas. The library profession is predominantly female, and because family planning is not common (either for religious or social reasons) and because the idea of a career woman is a new concept, there is a high dropout rate in training institutions and a high attrition rate after graduation.

Apart from uneven development in different types of libraries in a country, and a tendency for most of the libraries to be in the cities, there may also be uneven development of libraries in different parts of the country, particularly in a federal political structure, rather than a unitary state. When there is decentralization of political power to states or provinces, the priorities for libraries will vary widely the provision made for libraries in each province or state will reflect these priorities.

Where availability of funds and political considerations do not preclude the recruitment of expatriate librarians, especially in senior technical (as distinct from administrative) positions, there is often difficulty in obtaining suitable staff, due to a degree of political instability in the developing country, possibly law and order problems difficulties of schooling for young children, rapid expansion of libraries in some developed countries or difficulty of finding a job back in one's home country if one leaves a good existing job in developed countries where there is an over-supply of librarians. As a result, the majority of applicents for library positions are either librarians at the beginning of their careers or librarians who have retired or who are rearing the end of their career.

Some countries use expatriate volunteers but this can only be a short term solution or a stop-gap measure. One cannot plan a continuing and stable library system around foreign volunteers.

In addition to the low priority given to libraries by planners, improved health services, better nutrition and pacification of warring tribes and little effective birth control mean that more babies survive and more people live longer, putting pressure on public services, forcing creation of new jobs and increasing demend for social welfare.

There are sometimes civil wars, which though they decrease the population for a short period, divert scarce funds, military expenditure and disrupt production and the economy.

There is no general demand for libraries, and a result there is little political mileage to be gained from advocating library development. Politicians therefore normally press for hospital, school, roads, employment and business opportunities, and whether they are re-elected or not often depends on their ability to obtain these items not libraries for their electorates.

Consequently there is little or no pressure from the politicians on the planners and decision makers for libraries. There are exceptions, however, where librarians have able to use the political system or to mobilize public support for libraries, but this is a rare.

Because libraries have too low a priority in the national budget, some countries may rely on foreign aid for libraries. There are some inherent difficulties, such as aid donors insisting on something that is clearly identifiable as their gift, such as a building, a mobile library or a model project, and the inability of the developing country to continue to staff the library, to provide new replacement vehicles or to buy new books.

On a more positive side, the recent decade has seen an increasing interest by UNESCO and other international bodies in library and information services, increased awareness of the value of resource sharing and library cooperation on a regional or international basis, and the increasingly international nature of librarianship.

Factors Affecting Libraries in Developing Countries

Some of the factors affecting the development and history of libraries in developing countries are the following:

1. Language: At one end of the scale English, French or another European language is the de-facto national language or one of the official languages, while a small number of vernaculars exists. At the other end of the scale is Papua New Guinea with 700 languages (about two-thirds of the world's known languages), with most of them unwritten and with three 'official' languages, but no single 'national' language. Implications for libraries: most books are in the reader's second or third language; the language of the average foreign book is too difficult for most reader; only a minority can read these books.

2. Distribution of Population: In many countries, most of the population is widely scattered in small hamlets or villages in the rural areas, making provision of library services both difficult and costly.

3. Topography: In many countries there are vast distances from one end of the country to the other, or sparsely populated islands scattered over a large area of ocean, or high mountains. Implications: Difficult to distribute books; may have be done by air freight.

4. Poor Communication: Few roads, of poor quality Implications: Some communities accessible only by walking or by helicopter; ~~poked~~ deterioration of motor vehicles. ← rapid

5. Level of Formal Education: Varies widely in developing countries and even within areas of the country, depending on how recent contact with Western influence has been. Implications: the lower the general level, the less favorable the environment for libraries.

6. Illiteracy: Varies from fairly low rate to as much as 80%. Implications: Libraries may only cater for a minority of the population, making it even harder to obtain resources.

7. Agriculture and Mining Based Economies: Bulk of the nation's income may be derived from tropical agricultural products, the prices of which fluctuate widely on the world markets or on the exhort of minerals which are also subject to depressed prices. Because most developing countries have few industries, rely heavily on the import of manufactured products from developing countries. The result is an uncertain income, imported inflation, depletion of foreign currency ~~pj~~serves and ~~cu~~balance in payments. In this economic climate, there may little left for 'luxuries' like libraries. Here-so im-

8. Poor Image of the Library Profession: Though not unique to developing countries, the resultant low status and low income, when combined with the fact that other professions and occupations attract most of the best trained and most able personnel magnifies the damaging effect on the library profession.

9. Lack of the Reading Habit: Though developed countries regard reading for pleasure as normal and desireble, in developing countries there may be no privacy to read, no light to read by at night, and sitting alone with a book may be regarded as anti-social behaviour, in a village where emphasis is on communal activities, with the result that the reading habit is not encouraged or developed.

10. Lack of Suitable Reading Material: Little published that is of local interest or at suitable lenguege level in English, etc. or in the vernaculers. Little local book production, due to uneconomic size of markets, few local authors, etc.

11. Reliance on Imported Books: Most books are imported, making them costly and they take a long time to arrive.

12. Foreign Exchange Restrictions: Some countries have rigid control of foreign exchange, making it difficult to obtain foreign books.

13. The Custodial Concept of Librarianship: Some developing countries, make the librarian responsible for the loss or damge of a bopk, so that the librarian as more interested in the safe custody of the book, rather than making it available for use.

14. Censorship: A number of countries have censorship (political, religious, moral, etc.), which discourages the free dissemination of library materials.

15. Oral Tradition: Reliance on the spoken word, rather then written or printed word, for the transmission of history, culture and traditions.

Each developing country has individual characte rs which affect the development of libraries, but there tend to be some factors common to regions, and many of developing countries have several of the factors outlined.

Conclusion:

The picture of libraries in the developing countries I have given you is a most depressing one. However, the re is score for optimism. Despite the odds, dedicated and able librorians in some these countries have established good library services, and continue to fight for continued progress. With initial needs for manpower being satisfied, more able and well qualified people will enter librorianship. As long as there are individual librorians in developing countries who refused to give up and who are highly motivated to serve their people, change will come.